



# All aboard The Marrakech Express

Charles Campion eats at Meimo in Windsor

*Editorial: Charles Campion*

Once upon a time, the tourism season in Britain was a fairly predictable affair: the hordes would arrive in April and be with us until October. With the crowds would come enthusiasm, a passion for happy snaps, and a good living for all those 'Ye Olde Sweet Shops' and vendors of plastic policeman's helmets.

Restaurants scrabbled to keep up with the ever-changing accents and unusual dietary requirements. For businesses, it's hard to cope with the sheer unpredictability of it all and now to make matters worse, the tourist season lasts the whole year. Parties of rugged Australians will not allow the autumn or winter weather to spoil their trip to Windsor. The town is buzzing both in and out of season. Peascod Street runs down from the castle walls through the centre of town; the spine linking the various glossy shopping malls and famous name fashion shops. The only way to cope with the surging waves of people was to banish cars, so Peascod Street is now pedestrianised. The town's restaurateurs have cashed in

on this opportunity and there are islands of brightly coloured outdoor seating down the middle of the brick paved street – two Italian eateries; a German bakery; a crêpe specialist; a burger restaurant; plus an implausible number of coffee shops.

You'll find Meimo close to the cross roads at the bottom of the hill, a small Moroccan restaurant that has built up a loyal following among locals. Selling authentic Moroccan food to all those tourists visiting Windsor Castle is a difficult ask, but the locals know good food when they see it and business is brisk. Meimo is run by Abdul and Amina Aitbenmoussa, and is a family restaurant that has its roots in Marrakech. When the couple decided to set up their own restaurant, Abdul was working as front of house in an Italian restaurant further up Peascod Street. Amina spent a year working in the kitchens of Le Styria – a 760-seater in Marrakech where her aunt was head chef – before returning to Windsor and opening Meimo with her husband. The menu at Meimo is a large and colourful affair. There

is a sense of generosity about the large number of dishes. Some are 'backstop' dishes – a ribeye steak (£15.95); chicken salad (£9.95); roast half chicken (£11.95); a burger (£11.95); and grilled seabass (£14.95) – which are designed to appeal to customers uneasy about unfamiliar Moroccan dishes.

As you would expect, simply combine several small dish starters and you have a lavish mezze. The hummus (£4.45) is well made and not over processed. The carrot zaalouk (£4.45) is most impressive, a good balance between sweet and savoury, and very rich. By way of a change, zaalouk can also be made from aubergine (£4.95) – once again with concentrated flavours and a great texture. That great North African classic, briouat (£5.95), is done well: ultra-crisp filo cigars with a filling of goats' cheese and spinach. On a simpler note, you could opt for prawn pil pil (£7.95) – large prawns, accurately cooked so that they have not gone soggy, with a rich tomato and harissa sauce. The breads are good – conventional



“Service is the right side of slick”

pitta and a rather fine flatbread. Fittingly, the star of the show is the pastilla (£7.95). This is an elegant pie made using filo pastry with a filling that teams chicken with almonds and orange blossom water. This pie is served with a dusting of icing sugar and is one of the few classic dishes that successfully combines sweet and savoury. Indeed, Moroccan dishes work well for diners avoiding gluten or sticking to vegetarian dishes.

At Meimo, the small dishes selection includes a dozen items that are gluten-free and eight that are suitable for vegetarians. Another very popular series of dishes are the brochettes. There's a chargrilled chicken brochette – marinated chicken, grilled and served on a bed of rice with a perky little salad (£13.45). Or there's the formidable mixed grill (£14.95) – a skewer of chicken; a skewer of lamb; a skewer of kofta and a merguez sausage.

Overwhelmingly popular, the lamb shank tagine (£14.95) comes in the traditional clay dish with a conical lid. The shank is cooked long and slow to melt all those connective tissues and get the goodness out of the bone. The result is an epic, gluey gravy and meat that just slips off the bone. That gravy is further enriched with dried apricots and prunes, one of the few occasions when fruit works well with meat. As a final grace note the tagine is sprinkled with sesame seeds. It is a very good dish indeed. There are also four vegetarian tagines that are worth exploring: loubia (£10.95) is made using cannellini beans; or tagine mangoub (£10.95) is made from slow-cooked broad beans.

This is a friendly, family-run establishment and service is the right side of slick. The dining room is not over-dressed, but there are a few bright red hangings that are appropriate, as Marrakech is nicknamed

the Red City. The wine list is not grasping, and hidden among the New World options there are a few interesting Moroccan wines at sound prices – Ksar Rouge, Ben M'Tir (£4.95 a glass and £20.50 a bottle). Paul Bocuse – the grand old man of French cuisine – is reputed to have said that after France, Moroccan cuisine is the best in the world, which makes it all the more puzzling that good Moroccan restaurants are so few and far between. Perhaps the answer to this conundrum lies in the nature of Moroccan dishes? They tend to work best when home-cooked rather than as showy over-presented restaurant food. At Meimo the presentation on the plate is simple. The family recipes are cherished, the kitchen knows its business and the service smiles. No wonder locals have warmed to the place, despite the fact that Meimo is much more Marrakech than Windsor. ☺

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## Lamb shank tagine

Recipe provided by Abdul and Amina Aitbenmoussa on behalf of Meimo's Restaurant, Windsor

### INGREDIENTS

1 kg lamb shanks, dark pepper, salt, paprika, saffron, cinnamon stick, olive oil, vegetable oil, chopped onions and cold water. 1 large casserole dish, covering lid, 10cm diameter. 2 lamb shanks, trimmed about 20gms each, 10cm diameter. 2 large onions, chopped. 2 tbsp olive oil. 4 dried apricots. 1kg dried apricots. 1kg dried prunes. 10g saffron threads, soaked in cold water. 10g sultana threads, soaked in cold water. 2 tbsp clear honey. 1kg sugar. 2 bay leaves. ½ tsp saffron powder.

Place the lamb and lamb bones in a tagine, add the crushed prunes, apricots and onions and cover gently for 10 mins. Sprinkle over the toasted saffron seeds just before serving.

2 Place the dry apricots and prunes in a large casserole dish, add water and bring to the boil until almost soft.

3 Heat the butter in a large casserole dish, add the onions and lamb shanks, add saffron powder, honey and 2 litres of lamb stock from the lamb casserole and cook over a gentle heat for 2-3 hours until thick and creamy.

4 Turn the saffron seeds over a heated dry pan.



## FIFTY YEARS ON FOR THE CRAFT GUILD OF CHEFS

The lamb shank tagine is something of a signature dish at Meimo, and the recipe has been included in the Craft Guild of Chefs 50th Anniversary Recipe Book; deserved recognition for the Aitbenmoussa family's authentic recipe.